

# Back to Literariness?— And What About Interliterariness?

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I am happy that the theme of this congress and international conference will be the methodological reconsideration of comparative literary studies. »Reinstating literariness« should be the first step. According to me, »installing interliterariness« (in a slightly weird English wording) could be one of the later steps. This is my hope, but maybe also the illusion of an idealistic dreamer.

The first to coin the word »literariness« or *wenxuexing* 文學性 (in Russian литературность, in Czech *literárnost*) was the Russian linguistic and critical genius Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) in 1921 as an outcome of Russian formalism, later taken over and slightly adapted by Czech structuralism.<sup>1</sup> Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) in his essay »O jazyce básnickém« (On Poetic Language), translated into English as »Standard Language and Poetic Language«, from the year 1940, stresses the necessity of 'foregrounding' (*stavění se do popředí*, in Chinese *qianzhi* 前置) which is similar to the Russian *ostranenie* 'defamiliarization'.<sup>2</sup> This explanation of 'literariness' has in it much of the Russian formalist and Czech

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- 1 Wu Yuyan, »On Russian Formalists' Literariness«, *US-China Language* 4,9 (Sep 2006), 36–40. On Mukařovský's brief understanding of 'interliterariness' see Meyer H. Abrams and Geoffrey G. Harpham, *Glossary of Literary Terms* [1957] (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 8th ed. 2005), 127.
- 2 Jan Mukařovský, »O jazyce básnickém«, in *Kapitoly z české poetiky* [Chapters from Czech Poetics], 3 vols. (Prague: Melantrich, 1941–48), 1: 90; partially translated into German by Walter Schamschula, in Jan Mukařovský, *Kapitel aus der Poetik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1967).

structuralist understanding of the problem. It would be difficult to claim that Jacobson's understanding of 'literariness' was as simple as it may appear from the often-cited quotation in writings about him. The *locus classicus* for 'literariness' is from his *Noveishaya russkaya poezia* (Recent Russian Poetry):

The object of literary scholarship is not literature but literariness, i.e. which makes a given work a literary one. Up to now literary scholars were more similar to policemen who, aiming to arrest some person, will round up everybody and everything to be found in the flat, even the people passing by chance on the street. Prey to the historian was human existence, psychology, politics, philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

In 1959, René Wellek wrote the following about literariness:

Literary scholarship will not make any progress methodologically, unless it determines to study literature as a subject distinct from other activities and procedures of man. Hence we must face the problem of 'literariness', the central issue of aesthetics, the nature of art and literature.<sup>4</sup>

What one of the greatest scholars in literature of the twentieth century probably had in mind here were not aesthetics as such, but the embodiment of aesthetic value and other values of literary works. When mentioning the central issue of aesthetics, Wellek might have in mind Ján Mukařovský's study »Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty« (Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts) and those concerned with general aesthetics from the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>5</sup> The question of literariness was a subject of Jonathan Culler's paper at the ICLA Congress in Paris in 1985.<sup>6</sup> In another paper in 2000, Culler claimed that the problem of the distinctiveness of literature and its relations to aesthetics had not been the focus of theoretical activity, but of issues of race, gender and class.<sup>7</sup> In his excellent study, Marko Juvan later responded to these and many others discussing the problems of literariness after structuralism up to Siegfried J. Schmidt's empirical study of literature.<sup>8</sup> Juvan presents his conclusion in the following way:

3 See Note 1.

4 René Wellek, »The Crisis of Comparative Literature«, in *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. by Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 282–285.

5 Cf. Rita Felski, »The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies«, in *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, ed. by Michael Bérubé (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell 2004), 12–16.

6 Jonathan Culler, »La littérature«, in *Theorie littéraire. Problèmes et perspectives*, ed. by Marc Angenot & al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), 31–43.

7 Jonathan Culler, »The Literary in Theory«, in *What's Left of Theory? New York on the Politics of the Literary Theory*, ed. by Judith Butler & al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 273.

8 Siegfried J. Schmidt, »Empirical Study of Literature: Why and Why Not?«, in *The Systemic and*

First, literariness is a flexible, historically, socially and culturally differentiated convention, derived from the immanent characteristics of some literary works (canonized, classic, paradigmatic...) Second, along with Bourdieu's sociology of the literary field, it is the contextual and systemic approach to literature [...] that provides us the most convincing answers to the complexities of literariness.

And third, where Juvan seems to contradict or rightly supplement Jacobson, those who are concerned with explaining the problems of literariness cannot be *pure observers of literature; instead, they should be aware of their identity as participants who—at least indirectly, via systems of culture including science and education—collaborate in the construction of the notion and conventions of literature as well as study of literature and culture.*<sup>9</sup>

I agree with this if Juvan had in mind the relation of literature and culture as Henry H. H. Remak (1916–2009), one of the most penetrating minds among the theoreticians of comparative literature, understood it.

The leading authorities of the ICLA after the Paris and Munich congresses (1985 and 1988) began flirting with the idea of comparative »literature and culture« studies.

»Comparative Literature and Culture« became the name of this discipline after the Tokyo Congress in 1991. Ulrich Weisstein, Remak's colleague from Bloomington, characterized the crisis in the theory of comparative literature with the words of Dante: »Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.« (»Abandon all hope, ye who enter here«, i.e. into Dante's Hell, in Chinese *Nimen zou jin zbeli de, ba yiqie xiwang juanqi ba*. 你們走進這裡的，把一切希望捐棄吧). When defining the concept of comparative literature, Remak could not foresee the invasion of often shallow cultural studies, although he opened a Pandora's Box with his definition in 1961.<sup>10</sup>

In 1994 Harold Bloom, one of the greatest literary scholars of our time, successor to Wellek at Yale, complained that those who caused it were »pseudo-Marxists, pseudo-feminists, watery disciples of Foucault and other French theorists. Not only at Yale are there professors who are far more interested in

*Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Application*, ed. by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Irene Sywenky (Edmonton: University of Alberta; Siegen University, 1997), 137.

9 Marko Juvan, »On Literariness: From Post-Structuralism to Systems Theory«, in *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*, ed. by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2003), 93—present author's emphasis.

10 Henry H. H. Remak, »Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function«, in *Comparative Literature. Method & Perspective*, ed. by Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), 1.

various articles on the compost-heap of so-called popular culture than they are in Proust, Shakespeare or Tolstoy.« Literary studies, and I think that he also had in mind comparative literary studies, in recent times have been taken over »by the garbage called cultural criticism.«<sup>11</sup> Maybe Bloom's criticism was too harsh.

But Weisstein's »From Ecstasy to Agony: The Rise and Fall of Comparative Literature«<sup>12</sup> shows us that comparative literary theory had its times of ecstasy (at the end of the 1950s and later) and its agony (in the 1990s). Is it better now? Do we have still some hope? Probably yes.

The decision of the organizers of the Shanghai congress to »reinstate literariness« in the study of comparative literature is the right one. Maybe it is a beginning to fulfilling the sincere inner wish of Remak, who wrote in 1985:

Comparative Literary History, Comparative Text Criticism, and the Comparative Arts are the cornerstone of Comparative Literature in academia. A structured foothold in academia and a reasonably specific curriculum are indispensable for our survival and the professional future of many of our students. In its turn, Comparative Literature is part of the comparative investigation of cultures. But it must play its distinct role in this larger domain. In so doing, it will not only justify its own *raison d'être* but *give substantive credibility to the amorphous orbit of culture studies*.<sup>13</sup>

Later, at the eve of our century, Remak added the following to his assertion:

As the interdisciplinary ambitions of supposedly 'literary' scholars have mushroomed (linguistics, structuralism, history of ideas, philosophy, political and economic ideology, communication theory, semiotics), their literary sense and their knowledge of foreign languages and cultures have declined. *Comparative Literature is not well served through such a subservient arrangement*.<sup>14</sup>

So much for these three days in Shanghai, the Paris of the Far East.

I wish much success to the organizers of the Tenth Triennial Congress of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association and its concurrent International Scholarly Conference, and to all its participants.

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11 Harold Bloom, »We Have Lost the War. Interview with Ken Shulman«, *Newsweek* (Nov 7, 1994), 82.

12 *Neohelicon* 24,2 (1997), 95–116.

13 Henry H. H. Remak, »The Situation of Comparative Literature at the Universities«, *Collegium Helveticum* 1 (1985), 10—present author's emphasis.

14 Henry H. H. Remak, »Once Again: Comparative Literature at the Crossroads«, *Neohelicon* 26,2 (1997), 107—present author's emphasis.